

A CROSS-CENTERED PEOPLE

1 Peter 4:12-19

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The presence of evil and suffering in the world has served as a point of religious debate since the beginning of evil and suffering. The problem of evil is just what the phrase suggests, a problem. While there is much we can know concerning the “why” for suffering, there is much that we must be content to leave with the mind of God, as a mystery that He in His infinite wisdom has chosen not to reveal to His creatures.

But that would suggest that one believes in the Creator God of Scripture. It is interesting that this very problem of evil and the presence of suffering are what lead some to remain skeptical of God, atheists if you will. One philosopher posits, “If a good and powerful God exists, he would not allow pointless evil, but because there *is* much unjustifiable, pointless evil in the world, the traditional good and powerful God could not exist. Some other god or no god may exist, but not the traditional god.”¹ So evil and suffering is evidence against an all-good and all-powerful God. Others take the problem of evil and suffering personally, taking the following stance, “I won’t believe in a God who allows suffering, even if he, she, or it exists. Maybe God exists. Maybe not. But if he does, he can’t be trusted.”²

But what about the believer? What about the Christian who suffers? What should their response to evil and suffering be, especially when it is not justified? Peter says that *inasmuch as the believer is focused on the Cross of Christ and the cross they take up in Christ, those who bear the name of Christ are to ever be rejoicing in their sufferings*. Contrary to the skeptics misunderstanding, evil and suffering is an evidence *for* God. It is a problem, but to abandon a belief in God does not make the problem easier to handle. For the believer, one of the greatest arguments that evil and suffering is evidence for the existence of God is seen in the gruesome acts at Calvary, where the very problem of evil and suffering was defeated, so much so that John in Revelation 21:3-5 proclaimed,³ “Behold, the tabernacle of God is among men, and He will dwell among them, and they shall be His people, and God Himself will be among them,⁴ and He will wipe away every tear from their eyes; and there will no longer be *any* death; there will no longer be *any* mourning, or crying, or pain; the first things have passed away.”⁵ And He who sits on the throne said, ‘Behold, I am making all things new.’ And He said, ‘Write, for these words are faithful and true.’”

With this in mind, Peter gives three ways the believer should not respond to suffering to reinforce his thesis that the only proper response is to rejoice in it.

I. Don’t Be Surprised by Suffering (4:12-13)

This is the fifth time that Peter has alluded to the subject of trials and difficulties of testing in the Christian life. This section brings to a conclusion a section which began back in the second chapter verse 11, where he begins with the expression, “Beloved.” And now again in verse 12 of chapter 4 you’ll see he once again begins with the same term of endearment as though these are two bookends in which Peter has included a section of teaching in which he wants us not to be surprised by the painful trial that may come to us as the professing people of God.

¹ J. L. Mackie, *The Miracle of Theism*, quoted by Timothy Keller, *The Reason for God*, 23.

² *The Reason for God*, 22.

1. We will not be surprised when we recognize that suffering is normal (v. 12)

For generations the Jews had been subjected to persecution in the forms of ridicule, oppression, exile, and even slaughter. They had been slaves in Egypt and captives in Babylon. In Jesus' day they had passed through many afflictions, and as we have seen in the book of Acts, persecution against the Jew who converted to Christ was common in the early church. The Jews were used to suffering. But Peter's readers, among who were many Gentile Christians, had never been part of a religious or cultural minority. At first the hostile reactions against their conversion to Christianity might shock and alarm them. So they needed a bit of special preparation and this is why Peter tells them that they should "**not be surprised**" or find anything "**strange**" about suffering for Christ. In fact, this is the kind of repercussions that they ought to expect. Their sufferings should not seem "**strange**" to them, but a normal part of following Christ.

Peter here only reiterates what he himself had learned from Jesus. The Apostle's needed a time of special preparation as well before Christ was brutally murdered at the hands of godless men. Jesus told them that they should not be surprised at what was about to happen to them because of their faith in Him.

John 15:18-21 – ¹⁸ "If the world hates you, you know that it has hated Me before *it hated* you. ¹⁹ If you were of the world, the world would love its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, because of this the world hates you. ²⁰ Remember the word that I said to you, 'A slave is not greater than his master.' If they persecuted Me, they will also persecute you; if they kept My word, they will keep yours also. ²¹ But all these things they will do to you for My name's sake, because they do not know the One who sent Me."

The narrative states that the Apostles were confused by these words. At this point they might have thought the simplest solution was for them to go with Him, to leave this world with Him. But Jesus in His High Priestly prayer in John 17 prayed:

John 17:14-21 – ¹⁴ "I have given them Your word; and the world has hated them, because they are not of the world, even as I am not of the world. ¹⁵ I do not ask You to take them out of the world, but to keep them from the evil *one*. ¹⁶ They are not of the world, even as I am not of the world. ¹⁷ Sanctify them in the truth; Your word is truth. ¹⁸ As You sent Me into the world, I also have sent them into the world. ¹⁹ For their sakes I sanctify Myself, that they themselves also may be sanctified in truth. ²⁰ I do not ask on behalf of these alone, but for those also who believe in Me through their word; ²¹ that they may all be one; even as You, Father, *are* in Me and I in You, that they also may be in Us, so that the world may believe that You sent Me.

Did you catch that? Why does Christ ask the Father to leave the Apostles and all those who believe in Him on this earth, on an earth that is full of worldly people who hate Christian's and only seek to persecute them? So that they too might believe! Peter had already written in 4:4 that the world was surprised by the actions of Christians. Here he stresses that worldly opposition is normal, not "**strange.**" Whereas the world should be surprised by your actions, Peter says you should not be surprised by theirs, even though it be a "**fiery ordeal.**" One writer describes what we should expect this way:

Non-Christians hate Christians because non-Christians hate Christ. Christians follow Christ and identify with him; therefore, non-Christians hate Christians also. And why

do non-Christians hate Christ? It is because, as John 3:20 says, “Everyone who does evil hates the light.” Or, as 1 John 3:12 says, Cain murdered his brother “because his deeds were evil and his brother’s were righteous.” In other words, non-Christians hate Christ and Christians, not because there is something wrong with us (4:4), but because there is something wrong with them. It is not because Christians are antisocial, treasonous, subversive, and so on, but it is because non-Christians are evil people. Therefore, John says, “Do not be surprised, brethren, if the world hates you” (1 John 3:13).³

2. We will not be surprised when we recognize the *purpose* for our suffering (v. 13)

Rather than think their sufferings “**strange**,” Peter says that they should “**keep on rejoicing**” because they are able to participate in “**the sufferings of Christ.**” Is this Peter, who earlier in his life rebelled against the idea that Jesus would suffer?

Matthew 16:21-26—²¹ From that time Jesus began to show His disciples that He must go to Jerusalem, and suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and be raised up on the third day. ²² Peter took Him aside and began to rebuke Him, saying, “God forbid *it*, Lord! This shall never happen to You.” ²³ But He turned and said to Peter, “Get behind Me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to Me; for you are not setting your mind on God’s interests, but man’s.” ²⁴ Then Jesus said to His disciples, “If anyone wishes to come after Me, he must deny himself, and take up his cross and follow Me. ²⁵ For whoever wishes to save his life will lose it; but whoever loses his life for My sake will find it. ²⁶ For what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world and forfeits his soul? Or what will a man give in exchange for his soul?”

But we know that this is not now the same Peter. He had seen the risen Lord and preached those sermons to the Jews in Acts and been a part of the planting of the early church. He was a man who understood more of Christ’s sufferings, sufferings that he was actively engaged that would ultimately lead to his own martyrdom in a few short years. Here Peter reminds his readers that they perhaps were right where he was earlier in his life, where he had once found it “**strange**” that the Lamb of God should suffer and die. These believers no doubt misunderstood their participation with Christ in His suffering like he once had. Peter says to them, “Don’t focus on your own troubles, but rejoice in the fact that you have been counted worthy to suffer for Christ.”

But why should this be a source of joy? Because their sufferings with Christ, and our sufferings with Christ, bring us into closer fellowship with His sufferings and serve as proof that we are truly in union with Him. Peter had already reminded them of this truth in the opening of the letter, 1 Peter 1:6-7, where he told them, ⁶ “Greatly rejoice, even though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been distressed by various trials, ⁷ so that the proof of your faith, *being* more precious than gold which is perishable, even though tested by fire, may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ.” Here he reminds them of both the present and future blessings associated with their sufferings.

At present, Peter reminds them that their present suffering is not a threat to their spiritual life, but a pledge of the reality of their union with Christ. The more they suffered for Christ, the greater their ground for rejoicing. When suffering for the sake of righteousness is perceived this way, the command to “**keep on rejoicing**” makes sense. Edmund Hiebert points out, “Faith

³ Vincent Chung, *Commentary on First Peter*, 171.

realizes that the ground for rejoicing does not lie in the sufferings themselves, but in the fellowship with Christ that they bring.”⁴

But Hiebert goes on to point out, as does Peter, that this rejoicing also relates to the Christian’s experience in the future. In his introduction, Peter reminded them that their present sufferings served as an anchor for their future hope. Here he revisits that truth. **“Keep on rejoicing,”** he says, **“so that”** (here is the purpose), **“so that at the revelation of His glory you may rejoice with exultation.”** “Rejoice now,” he says, “so that you can rejoice even more at His return.” It is then that their joy, and the joy of every believer, will be made complete because their hope is fully realized. Then they, and all who know Christ savingly, will be overjoyed.

So Peter tells these who were not as adept to suffering for the cause of Christ as he and others that they should not think of sufferings, which were theirs at present with still more to come, as out of the ordinary, but normal, because it is part of their preparation for present and future fellowship with the One who suffered for them. Derek Thomas put it like this, “If suffering makes you more like Jesus, if suffering reminds you of your relationship to Jesus Christ, that ought to make us joyful. That ought to remind us of the true nature of our existence here on earth and that is a foretaste, just a little glimpse of what is to come. Suffering is the raw material of joy.”⁵ Or, as another put it, “Adversity is the diamond dust heaven polishes its jewels with.”⁶ So we are to rejoice not in the suffering itself, but in sharing in Christ’s suffering as we follow in His steps, as we “deny self, take up our cross, and follow Him.” We are not to be *surprised* by suffering.

II. Don’t Be Ashamed by Suffering (4:14-16)

Having pointed out how it is that the believer who shares in Christ’s sufferings are to rejoice, Peter now identifies the nature of the suffering, that being the insults they received because of **“the name of Christ.”**

1. We should not be ashamed for *undeserved* suffering (v. 14, 16)

Peter repeats what he had said in 3:14 concerning suffering for the sake of righteousness. However, there he did not explain how it is that people are blessed through suffering. Here he does. Believers are blessed by God if they are **“reviled”** or “insulted” because of their allegiance to Christ. They may be insulted by man, but they are blessed by God. Here Peter echoes the words of Jesus in Matthew 5:11, “Blessed are you when *people* insult you and persecute you, and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of Me.”

The last clause of v. 14 explains why believers are blessed, **“because the Spirit of glory and of God rests on you.”** This refers to the Holy Spirit, and these words hearken back to Isaiah 11:1-3 where it is foretold that Jesus would be endowed and empowered by this same Holy Spirit. This has been fulfilled and the Spirit now also rests on Christians. All of those who by faith are in union with Christ receive this privilege, this blessing, of God’s Spirit coming and resting on them. It is the Holy Spirit that enables and allows us to rejoice in the midst of suffering, because by our suffering for Jesus’ name we know that we are truly His. One writer

⁴ D. Edmund Hiebert, *1 Peter*, 285.

⁵ Derek Thomas, http://www.fpcjackson.org/resources/sermons/Derek%27s_SERMONS/1%20Peter/06a1peter.htm, accessed 03/13/2009.

⁶ Robert Leighton, *An Obedient and Patient Faith*,

states, “If the Lord of glory who was anointed by the Spirit could suffer and be blessed, we should then expect that all of His faithful disciples who likewise possess the Spirit will also suffer and yet be blessed.”⁷ So Peter reminds them that they would suffer for the name of Christ.

He expands on this in v. 16, “**if anyone suffers as a Christian.**” “**If**” does not suggest that they might escape the suffering, but that they should consider the condition, focusing on the reason for their suffering, that being simply that they are a “**Christian.**” Here we have one of only three uses of this title in the New Testament. The other two are found in Acts, once in 11:26 and later in 26:28. In both places it serves as a derogatory name attached by outsiders to the followers of Christ. Here Peter uses that name to remind his readers of how they are viewed by those who do not follow Christ and that rather than be ashamed of Christ, His name, and now their name, as Peter was in the courtyard, rather than be ashamed, they should “**glorify God in this name.**” They do so by patiently enduring undeserved suffering with joy, pleased by the privilege they have to suffer with Christ.

2. We should be ashamed for *deserved* suffering (v. 15)

Suffering because of sinful behavior does not bring the same results. Even in our “deserved” suffering we are blessed in the sense that God often uses the occasion as a means of His divine discipline to bring us to repentance. But this does not bring the same kind of blessing that was bestowed upon Christ for His obedient suffering. In other words, Peter distinguishes our “deserved” sufferings, even though they are a means of God’s blessing, and those gained by the sufferings of Jesus. We are to be ashamed when we get what we deserve as a consequence of our sin. As R. C. Sproul noted, “It is an honorable thing only when we suffer for doing God’s will and never when we suffer a just punishment for doing wrong.”⁸

Most commentators note that in mentioning “**murderer**” and “**thief,**” Peter understands that most of his readers would not be guilty of such crimes but draws attention to these because they are crimes which carried the death penalty, the penalty that some of them as Christians might have to face for the sake of Christ. Some would be put to death for refusing to profess the emperor as Lord. That would be praiseworthy in God’s sight. But there is no inherent glory for dying as a murderer or a thief. That is simply just punishment.

But Peter also mentions what we might consider some lesser crimes, though they are sins that are more likely to be committed by his readers and might also bring deserved suffering. “**Evildoer**” or “criminal” was used twice earlier in the letter (2:12, 14) and refers to general wrongdoing and not criminal activity. It is contrasted with “doing good” and is better translated “wrongdoer.” “**Troublesome meddler**” is a bit more difficult to interpret because it occurs nowhere else in the New Testament, nowhere in the Septuagint (the Greek version of the Hebrew Bible), or in Greek literature before 1 Peter.⁹ Most see the word to refer to a busybody or a mischief-maker, one who is prone to stirring up trouble and causing division. Tom Schreiner suggests that “if believers act like busybodies, they would be considered to be pests who deserve ostracism and mistreatment... Peter wanted believers to refrain from acting tactlessly and without social graces.”¹⁰

So Peter’s point in this is that whenever we suffer, we must take care not to glory in it until we are sure it is the underserved suffering endured for confessing Christ. If we suffer for sin, we

⁷ *Tabletalk*, June 2005, 25.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 26.

⁹ Thomas R. Schreiner, *1,2 Peter, Jude*, 224.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 225.

deserve it, we should be ashamed of it, confess it, and realize that we have not been suffering for or with Christ, but because of self.

III. Don't Be *Discouraged* by Suffering (4:17-19)

Matthew 16:27-28 – ²⁷ For the Son of Man is going to come in the glory of His Father with His angels, and WILL THEN REPAY EVERY MAN ACCORDING TO HIS DEEDS. ²⁸ Truly I say to you, there are some of those who are standing here who will not taste death until they see the Son of Man coming in His kingdom.”

So the believer is not like the skeptic that we saw in our introduction. The existence of evil and suffering does not drive the believer away from God, but causes Him to flee to God because He is the all-powerful Creator and the all-faithful One who can be trusted.

Conclusion

1. How do we participate in Christ's sufferings? Not in an atoning way as a sacrifice for sin. That He accomplished alone by His sufferings (3:18). But we participate with Him in His sufferings in our relationship to Him. They hated Christ for His claims and His character. For those who take His name, they too will be hated for their claims and their character.

2. When do we glorify God in our sufferings? We glorify God in the fire when we bear it patiently. We glorify God in the fire when we are really and fully persuaded that God will not put us in the fire but for our good, and His glory. We glorify God in the fire when we say, “Lord, don't let the fire go out until it has purged away all my dross. We glorify God in the fire then we are content to say, “I know not what God does with me now, but I shall know hereafter.” You glorify God in the fire when you are not grumbling, but humbly submitting to His will. We glorify God in the fire when in the midst of the fire we can sing God's praises. Happy you that have got into Christ's fire!¹¹

¹¹ Excerpted and edited from *George Whitefield's Sermons*, vol. 1.